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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problems surrounding intercultural business communication as well as approaches to teaching college level business students appropriate communication skills for intercultural settings. Considered are the classification of countries by cultural context, i.e. how large a role culture, social values, and traditional social customs play in business dealings, and problems associated with doing business in high- and low-context culture countries. Also presented are means by which the teacher can enhance the learning experience for international students to improve their communication skills for the international marketplace. Finally, pedagogical principles for teaching intercultural communication skills for communicating in the global village of business are presented. It is noted that the prevailing concept in international and intercultural communication is empathy, and as the world develops into a global village, empathy for cultural orientation is vital for the business person. (GLR)

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Cultural Context and the New Communication Principles for Intercultural Communication

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Running Head: CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Cultural Context and the New Communication Principles for Intercultural Communication

Communication is a complicated process, and transmission of effective messages takes careful thought and analysis. Even in the one facet of simple language translations, major problems can occur. Consider the case of a United Nations computer that was programmed to translate the saying "Out of sight, out of mind" into Chinese, French, and then back to English. The result was "Invisible insane" (Lederer, 1987, p. 137). Another business gaffe occurred when Pepsi-Cola's "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" turned into "Pepsi brings back your dead ancestors" after being translated into Chinese (p. 138). These kinds of problems in international communication, however, are not restricted to differences in languages--they occur in all facets of the communication process.

As the global village becomes a reality, the business manager must become more cosmopolitan in that environment (Asante, 1989). In other words, the executive must become more sophisticated in the ways of the world. If a transition from rural life to city life is somewhat traumatic, the change from one culture to

another will be--and *should be*--even more so. As the business environment becomes increasingly international (or just intercultural), business people need to develop a sensitivity to the cultures and customs of those with whom they work and transact business. Harris and Moran (1979) advance the theory that communication is central to all international business. They make the following statement:

> It is the most important tool we have for getting things done. It is the basis for understanding, for cooperation and for action. In fact, the very vitality and creativity of an organization or a nation depends upon the content and character of its communications. (p. 17)

Most communication models describe to some degree the need for understanding the background of the receiver of a message; and in cross-cultural exchanges, this understanding may take hours, days, and even weeks to develop. The process is made more complex by the fact that the communication process is a mosaic, and the variables involved in any communication situation are constantly changing. Limaye and Victor (1990) describe the terms *rational* and *logical* as being in the mind and

in the culture rather than an unchanging standard for all. Consider this principle in light of the following communication situation. Varner, in an article entitled "Internationalizing Business Communication Courses" (1987), makes this statement: "[German sentences] are harder to read than English sentences." In terms of Varner's English-speaking orientation, German sentences probably *are* harder to read than English sentences; however, German grammar is more logical to the German (and to many people from other cultures) than English is. Harris and Moran (1979, p. 78) define this principle of culture-specific logicality and rationality in these two statements:

1. All behavior is rational and logical from the perspective of the behavior.
2. Persons from different cultures perceive and organize their environment in different ways, so that it becomes meaningful to them.

In effective communication, logic and rationality are two of the most important components; but when cultures differ in this most basic area, the process of communicating becomes complicated. To overcome this barrier, a study of the culture of the receiver of the

message must be undertaken. Defining specific cultures is not a simple thing: over one hundred definitions exist just for the term "culture" (Limaye & Victor, 1990). In business situations, however, a classification of the particular culture by the importance of context can be useful. The more a business manager knows about the culture and the context of the business dealings, the better he or she will be able to tailor the message to the needs of the receiver.

Cultural Context

Hall (1976) classified a variety of countries by the degree of importance of context for cultural mores. The Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures are classified as high-context cultures, while German, Swiss, Scandinavian, and North American cultures are defined as low-context cultures. In a high-context culture, the social values and traditional social customs play a greater part in communication situations and business dealings than do the written and spoken word. In low-context cultures, however, the written document takes precedence over traditional customs. High-context cultures are bound by unwritten laws, while low-context cultures abide religiously by the exact letter of the law.

High-Context Cultures

While all culture may be defined broadly as the social interaction in a particular society, the strength of the trust relationship that develops in a high-context society affects how the business is conducted and what the result is. In dealings with Japanese businessmen, for example, the respect and courtesy shown in communicating are vital for success. Such variables as social niceties, greetings, timing, the physical setting, and even age convey a stronger message than do the words in the agreement. Failure to show proper respect, getting down to business too soon, maintaining direct eye contact, responding without allowing time for thought, and just being young can indicate insincerity to such an extent that the actual words spoken and those written in the contracts are negated.

Low-Context Cultures

In low-context cultures such as the North American, simple courtesy is important also; but if the written contract is good, even gross errors of etiquette will be ignored in favor of the deal. Business meetings usually occur in business settings and are handled as directly and as efficiently as possible. Youth is often

considered to be an advantage, indicating vitality rather than the lack of experience, as it is seen to be in high-context cultures.

Application in the Classroom

These principles apply to both the way in which the teacher can enhance the learning experience for international students in the classroom as well as how students can improve their communication skills for the international marketplace. Waner & Winter (1992, pp. 3-6) present five pedagogical principles for intercultural communication:

1. Interpersonal relationships among students and with the teacher appear to be more important to students from high-context cultures than low-context cultures.

2. Careful diction, denotative rather than connotative language, and the avoidance of idioms, jargon, and clichés increase the international student's understanding.

3. The teacher's body language and tone of voice are important factors especially to students from high-context cultures.

4. Conciseness and deductive style of organization are accepted more readily by students from low-context cultures than those from high-context cultures; therefore, writing instruction should include both deductive and inductive reasoning techniques.

5. Mini-lectures (lectures delivered in short segments) may be necessary to allow time for students to ask questions in order to comprehend the material. Being able to explore a concept verbally is important to students from high-context cultures.

By taking the time to converse with students on a social level, the teacher can enhance the learning environment and improve the quality of the learning. A few minutes of conversation about the student's health, studies, and home country can improve the climate for interaction in the classroom.

Preparing classroom experiences to ensure that the context is easily understood by all students involves eliminating slang, unnecessary jargon, and clichés from presentations. The teacher should be conscious also of using body language and nonverbal messages that indicate sincerity, patience, and respect for all students. In

structuring the learning situation, classroom time should be divided into blocks that permit periodic interaction and discussion about each new concept.

Some concepts may clash with a student's cultural orientation; and although the deductive and inductive styles of writing are both considered important in American business communication, it may be necessary for the instructor to provide very comprehensive explanations about the reasoning behind both styles as they are used in American business situations. In addition, extra opportunities for practicing a particular style may be necessary to allow students from high-context cultures to develop skill in preparing deductive messages and for students from low-context cultures to develop skill in preparing inductive messages.

In teaching students how to prepare for communicating in the global village of business, students need to address the following principles for intercultural communication (Waner & Winter, 1992):

1. Consider the context of communication for the relevant cultures and adapt the message accordingly, using the appropriate amount and kind of courtesy and respect for the country, culture, and beliefs.

2. Keep the message concise, but give adequate explanation and maintain a courteous tone.
3. Make sure that the message is clear; use simple sentences and logical transitions and emphasis techniques.
4. Include necessary details so that the message is complete and further clarification is avoided.
5. Use simple language and correct mechanics, and use words literally as much as possible.
6. Present complicated explanations simply and with patience, repeating the explanation in other words if appropriate. (Take care to avoid sounding patronizing, however.) Use graphic aids to support the verbal message and indicate quantities in metric.
7. Use positive rather than negative wording to show respect for the reader's feelings.
8. Avoid wording that may sound prejudiced or stereotyping.
9. Use active voice for its simplicity unless the construction would give the message a self-centered tone.

10. Provide opportunities for interaction through questions and invitations to respond.

A useful learning strategy for developing student skill in intercultural communication is to evaluate either a written (or oral) business message of any country and analyze it in terms of the cultural context. This type of exercise can prove valuable for international students as well as for American students in developing sensitivity to cultural orientation. Students could be requested to look at the directness of the message, the degree and amount of courtesy included, the attention to accuracy and detail, and the amount and type of preliminary small-talk included. An assignment to respond to the letter in the same style would give the students direct exposure to typical communication situations in the global village.

Conclusion

A prevailing concept in international and intercultural communication is empathy. In the pedagogy as well as in the material and method, consideration for the cultural context of the receiver of the communication can improve the quality of the communication and the likelihood that the message will achieve its desired

effect. As the world develops into a global village where multinational corporations will control about half the world's assets by the year 2000 (Dulek, Fielden, & Hill, 1991, p. 20), empathy for cultural orientation is vital for the business person.

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